

1. Introduction

In his Christmas message to the people of Fiji, Governor Sir Kenneth Maddocks described 1961 as a year of 'peaceful progress'.¹ The memory of industrial disturbance and a brief period of rioting and looting in Suva in 1959 was fading rapidly.² The nascent trade union movement, multi-ethnic in character, which had precipitated the strike, was beginning to fracture along racial lines. The leading Fijian chiefs, stunned by the unexpectedly unruly behaviour of their people, warned them against associating with people of other races, emphasising the importance of loyalty to the Crown and respect for law and order.³ The strike in the sugar industry, too, was over. Though not violent in character, the strike had caused much damage to an economy dependent on sugar, it bitterly split the Indo-Fijian community and polarised the political atmosphere.⁴ A commission of inquiry headed by Sir Malcolm Trustram Eve (later Lord Silsoe) was appointed to investigate the causes of the dispute and to recommend a new contract between the growers, predominantly Indo-Fijians, and the monopoly miller, the Australian Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR). The recommendations of the Burns Commission — as it came to be known, after its chairman, the former governor of the Gold Coast (Ghana), Sir Alan Burns — into the natural resources and population of Fiji were being scrutinised by the government.⁵ The construction of roads, bridges, wharves, schools, hospital buildings and water supply schemes was moving apace. The governor had good reason to hope for 'peaceful progress'.

Rather more difficult was the issue of political reform, but the governor's message announced that constitutional changes would be introduced. The existing constitution, in place since 1937, had been overtaken by immense social, economic and demographic change in the postwar years.⁶ The international climate had also changed during this time. Former colonies in Asia and Africa had gained, or were in the process of gaining, independence.⁷ Harold Macmillan's 'winds of change' were gaining momentum everywhere. After Hong Kong, Fiji was Britain's last major colonial dependency in the East Asia-Pacific region. Whitehall was keen to avoid being overtaken by events. It hoped to lead Fiji to internal self-government if not to full independence perhaps over a decade of cautious, gradual reform. The constitutional settlement aimed for had to be broadly acceptable to all the people of the colony as well as to the international community — but especially to the indigenous Fijians, for reasons that will become clear shortly. The governor informed the Legislative Council that its size would be increased from 15 to 18 unofficial members, consisting of six Europeans, six Fijians and six Indo-Fijians. Four members of each community would be elected from separate communal rolls and two nominated by the governor. In the case of Fijians, the two members would be chosen by the Great

Council of Chiefs. The number of official members would be 19. Women would be extended franchise for the first time and the property qualification for voters abolished. The government hoped for a slow but steady start to assuage the fears and anxieties of all the segments of Fiji's society.

Therein lay the problem that would preoccupy Suva and London for the rest of the decade, until Fiji finally gained independence in 1970. Fiji was a colony not of 'one people' but of three separate ethnic groups, each with its own distinctive understanding of its interests and aspirations in the broad scheme of things, its own distinctive historical experience and economic circumstances.⁸ For one group, the Indo-Fijians, the pace of change was not rapid enough. They rejected the premises that underpinned the racially ordered political structure that Suva proposed and London reluctantly acquiesced to, and wanted it replaced with one that was racially neutral. In other words, they wanted a common-roll system of voting, not a communal system. Further, they saw any constitutional advance towards greater internal self-governance as leading inevitably and desirably to full independence in the not too distant future. If Western Samoa could become independent in 1962 and Cook Islands could attain full internal self-government in free association with New Zealand in 1965, why not Fiji, they argued (somewhat misleadingly) as Fiji, by virtue of its history and demography, was unique in the Pacific.

This view was rejected by the Europeans and Fijians. They insisted on the full and complete retention of the racial system of voting and guaranteed equal political representation for the three main groups, irrespective of population size. This guaranteed representation, it was feared, would be jeopardised in an open, non-racial system of voting, which, in their view, would lead to uncertainty and unrestrained competition for power. Since Indo-Fijians were the majority community, an open, racially neutral system would lead to 'Indian domination'. That outcome would be unpalatable at any cost, a sure recipe for disaster, perhaps even racial violence. Furthermore, Fijians and Europeans did not want links with the British Crown severed. They saw no reason for that. Unlike the Indo-Fijians, they instead wanted them strengthened.

London's dilemma was thus starkly defined. The prospect of independence could not be ignored, however much significant numbers of Fijians and Europeans opposed it. Nor could the UK government ignore the increasingly insistent and sometimes politically embarrassing demands for decolonisation from the United Nations' Committee of Twenty-Four.⁹ Western Samoa's independence from New Zealand in 1962 was followed by that of tiny Nauru from Australia, in 1968.¹⁰ By the early 1960s, the question was not whether Fiji would become independent; that was a foregone conclusion. Indeed, as Roderic Alley has pointed out, the paradox of decolonisation in Fiji 'was further underlined by British attempts,

throughout the 1960s, to encourage the growth of representative political organisations likely to responsibly contest office and hasten decolonisation'.¹¹

The real and the most fraught question was on what — or whose — terms would independence be achieved. The Colonial Office (CO) acknowledged the substance and the logic of the non-racial argument, and accepted the imperative to create, as far as possible, political institutions that were based on ideology, not race; however, its hands were tied. Officials had a prudent appreciation of the strength and character of the Fijian opposition to any change that might unwittingly give the impression of derogating from their privileged position in the colony. Fijians constituted the overwhelming majority of the colony's armed forces, a key fact that could not be ignored, or ignored at the government's peril. Moreover, there were many influential officials in London and in Suva who felt a keen sense of moral responsibility to hand the colony back to the people — the indigenous Fijians — who had ceded it to Her Majesty Queen Victoria in the first place and who had, in war and in peace, remained steadfastly loyal and respectful to the Crown.

This essay attempts to present as full an account as possible of the political dilemmas that Suva and London faced in deciding the future course of Fiji's constitutional evolution, and chronicles the ideas, issues, assumptions, understandings and internal debates that determined policy. Several points need to be emphasised. The documents on which this essay is based emphasise the concerns and priorities of the UK government, informed closely as they were by regular reports from Fiji. I have immersed myself in the Fijian side of this story as much as is possible, though it has to be said that sensitive documents on the period are not always found in the archives. More likely, they are to be located in disorganised and decaying private collections of the leading players of the day. Fortunately for the researcher, the most important documents (the Wakaya Letter, for example) or the substance of private conversation on controversial topics (such as the negotiations preceding the 1965 constitutional conference) were leaked to the newspapers or raised in political rallies. Local sources, where they can be located, can be useful in supplying colour and detail, but little of importance escaped London's notice. Some sources, such as the reports of the Fiji Intelligence Committee, are not found in Suva, but a complete set exists in London. The CO documents provide, without question, the most complete picture of the nature of political debate for the period.

There was broad agreement among top policy makers in Suva and London but by no means complete consensus on all major issues in dispute. On the contrary, the records show how widely divergent the views sometimes were and how, over time, they were developed through endless minutes into a coherent policy. Nor was there unanimity of opinion between London and Suva over what the most appropriate course of action might be. London listened and consulted

closely with the governor, paid close attention to his assessment of the situation on the ground, and sought his opinion and even initiative on important matters. There was hardly a policy of importance on which the governor was not consulted, although his views were refined or modified — sometimes even rejected — in the light of the wider experience in London.

A typical way in which policy was developed might follow this pattern. The governor would inform London of a particular issue or problem he had under consideration. This might be communicated through a letter or a telegram. It was sent after the governor had full consultation with his senior advisors, whose advice guided but did not necessarily confine the governor to a particular course of action or line of thought. On political and constitutional matters, the recipient in Whitehall was invariably the head of the Pacific and Indian Ocean Department, initially at the CO (until 1966, when the head was an assistant secretary). The CO then merged with the Commonwealth Relations Office to form the Commonwealth Office (1966–68), which in turn merged with the Foreign Office to form the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO)(from October 1968). At the CO, the communication would be the subject of internal debate or discussion through a series of internal departmental minutes and meetings. Other CO departments, or other government departments outside the CO, were brought in when needed. Within the CO, the discussion proceeded up a chain of command to a supervising assistant undersecretary responsible for several departments, including the Pacific and Indian Ocean, and then, on matters of the highest importance, to the permanent undersecretary, the senior CO official.

Ministerial involvement in Fiji's affairs was usually conducted at a level beneath that of secretary of state. While some secretaries of state visited Fiji as part of wider Pacific tours (Fred Lee from the CO in 1966 and Herbert Bowden from the Commonwealth Office in 1967), in London it was more usual for junior ministers — specifically the parliamentary undersecretary of state at the CO, and the minister of state at the Commonwealth Office and the FCO — to take responsibility for Fiji. Junior ministers were also visitors to Fiji. Julian Amery's 1960 visit as parliamentary undersecretary at the CO had significant long-term political consequences. Other junior ministers playing important but lesser roles were Nigel Fisher and Eirene White in 1963 and 1965 respectively, both as parliamentary undersecretaries at the CO, and Lord Shepherd, minister of state at the FCO. Shepherd was especially important at the time of Fiji's independence, visiting the colony shortly beforehand and presiding over the independence conference in London. Only rarely did the secretaries of state become involved with Fiji — a reflection, it must be said, of where Fiji ranked in UK priorities. Although Fiji was by some distance the most important of the United Kingdom's Pacific possessions — possessing what London viewed as an acute and potentially dangerous racial problem — it was still, in contrast with other territories (Aden and British Guiana, for example) relatively peaceful. To the extent that secretaries

of state involved themselves, it was usually in the context of where Fiji stood in relation to UK policy towards remaining dependent territories as a group. Communications were often sent back to Suva in the name of the secretary of state but junior ministers and senior officials were the real policy makers. Other cabinet ministers were hardly ever brought in, although, as was always the case before independence, Fiji had to be placed on the agenda of the Cabinet's influential Defence and Overseas Policy Committee. And policy towards Fiji did not change with a change of government in the United Kingdom. The policies on Fiji of the Conservative governments, to October 1964, and then from June 1970 until independence in October of the same year, and the Labour governments between 1964 and 1970 (an election in 1966 gave Labour an increased majority) were indistinguishable. The point was not appreciated sufficiently by some leaders in Fiji, particularly on the Indo-Fijian side, who expected from a Labour government a more sympathetic understanding of their cause and concerns.

Once a policy was communicated to the governor — and if the subject involved a significant constitutional change — an outline text was published in London as a white paper. These and their Suva counterparts are available widely. The documents referred to here are from the Public Records Office at Kew Gardens. Overwhelmingly, the documents I have drawn on are from two main classes at the National Archives (UK): CO 1036, the records of the Colonial and Commonwealth Office from the Pacific and Indian Ocean Department, 1952–67, and FCO 32, the successor Pacific and Indian Ocean Department of the Commonwealth Office and FCO from 1967 to 1974.

This essay — like the volume of documents to which it relates — focuses on the period 1960–70. With Fiji's independence in 1970, Britain's formal responsibility for the colony ceased, although there were continuing consultations about defence and related matters. The essay opens in 1960 because that was when the first serious discussion started about the future course of Fiji's constitutional development, and when the first policies toward greater internal self-government were enunciated. The decade was dominated in Fiji by intense, often deeply bitter, debate about decolonisation, especially about the way in which Fijian interests — accepted by everyone as special and requiring specific, watertight protection — could be safeguarded in any future constitutional arrangement within a framework that was, to all outward appearances, democratic and acceptable to the international community. The faint outline of what eventually transpired began to become visible by 1965, and clarified as the decade progressed.

Constitutional matters had been very much on the mind of Sir Ronald Garvey, Maddocks' predecessor as governor, throughout the 1950s. Garvey was an independent-minded old Pacific hand, having served from the late 1920s in a

number of locations, including the Solomon Islands, where he was district officer (1927–32), and then Nyasaland, St Vincent in the Caribbean and British Honduras (as governor, 1948–52) before becoming governor of Fiji in 1952.¹² From very early in his tenure as governor, he was concerned that Fiji's constitutional arrangements had become an obstacle to the colony's political progress and an impediment to harmonious race relations. From the mid-1950s onwards, Garvey proposed a number of constitutional reforms, none of which bore fruit during his time in Fiji because they were deemed premature, too far ahead of public opinion, or insufficiently cognisant of the constraints of the colony's complex and contested history; some of them would, however, be revisited a decade later only to show Garvey's farsightedness. Garvey was concerned also with the internal social and economic problems facing the Fijian people and with the problems hindering the economic advancement of Fiji. He took measures to address these issues, which came to the fore by the late 1950s and which would have important implications for social and political issues that dominated the 1960s. While the 1960s is the principal focus of this essay, events taking place during that time, the issues that divided the people and confounded senior officials in London and Suva, had deep roots in Fiji's colonial history. It is to these that we now turn.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ *Fiji: Report for the Year 1961, 1962*, Her Majesty's Stationery Service, London, p. 5.
- ² For an account of the strike, see Rutherford, Noel 1984, 'The 1959 Strike', in N. Rutherford and P. Hempenstall (eds), *Protest and Dissent in the Colonial Pacific*, Institute of Pacific Studies, Suva, pp. 73–86. The official report into the inquiry, 'Report of Commission of Inquiry into the Disturbances in Suva, December 1959', is in *Fiji Legislative Council Paper*, no. 10/1960.
- ³ For more details, see Lal, Brij V. 1992, *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the 20th Century*, University of Hawai'i Press, Honolulu, pp. 164–9. Ratu Mara was reported widely to have said after the 1959 disturbances that if Suva burned to the ground, the only thing the Fijian community would lose would be the record of their debts.
- ⁴ An account of this strike is contained in Lal, Brij V. 1997a, *A Vision for Change: A. D. Patel and the Politics of Fiji*, National Centre for Development Studies, The Australian National University, Canberra, pp. 133–58. The strike split the Indo-Fijian community between the majority, who wanted to continue it, and the powerful minority who wanted it to end.
- ⁵ See 'Report of the Commission of Enquiry into the Natural Resources and Population Trends of the Colony of Fiji 1959', published as *Legislative Council Paper*, no. 1/1960.
- ⁶ There is no satisfactory account of this subject, but see Stanner, W. E. H. 1953, *The South Seas in Transition: A Study of Post-War Rehabilitation and Reconstruction in Three British Pacific Dependencies*, Australasian Publishing Company, Sydney.
- ⁷ See Jeffrey, Robin 1970, *Asia: The Winning of Independence*, Macmillan, London.
- ⁸ The 'three Fijis' concept was given scholarly expression by Fisk, E. K. 1970, *The Political Economy of Independent Fiji*, Australian National University Press, Canberra.
- ⁹ The Committee of Twenty-Four—so named because of the number of members on it—was created by the UN General Assembly to implement its declaration on decolonisation. The committee drew a large number of its members from formerly colonised countries.
- ¹⁰ For a succinct survey, see Davidson, J. W. 1971, 'The Decolonisation of Oceania', *Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 6, pp. 133–50. See also Larmour, Peter 1983, 'The Decolonisation of the Pacific', in R. Crocombe and A. Ali (eds), *Foreign Forces in Pacific Politics*, Institute of Pacific Studies, Suva, pp. 1–25.
- ¹¹ Alley, Roderic 1986, 'The Emergence of Party Politics', in B. V. Lal (ed.), *Politics in Fiji: Studies in Contemporary History*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, p. 29.
- ¹² He would leave Fiji in 1958 to become Governor of the Isle of Man, from which post he retired in 1966.